



Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic **An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians**

Script 13: The Chosen People

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who has chosen us from among all the peoples and has given us Your Torah. Blessed are You, Lord, the Giver of Torah.”

This blessing, recited by a Jewish individual before the formal public reading of the Torah in a synagogue, is also the classic formulation of Jewish chosenness, the belief that Jews are God’s chosen people. This brief statement offers two important insights into this often-misunderstood concept.

First, the blessing is worded in the plural. The one offering the blessing does so, not on behalf of themselves, but for all the Jewish people. The relationship here is not between God and an individual Jew, but between God and the entire Jewish nation. Thus, the attribute the blessing evokes--in this case, chosenness--need not be evident in the life of any one Jew or, for that matter, any particular Jewish community, be it small or large. Chosenness is an attribute of the people as a whole and plays out over generations.

The second point is that chosenness is associated with being given God’s Torah. With that in mind, let’s look into Torah to understand what this attribute actually means.

The origins of the Torah’s association of chosenness with the Jewish people lie in the first words spoken to the patriarch Abram, later to be known as Abraham, in Genesis, Chapter 12, verses 2 and 3:

“Get yourself from your land, from your birthplace, from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and those who disparage you, I will curse. And all the families of the earth will bless themselves through you.”

Unlike Noah who, ten generations earlier, was singled out for his righteousness, no reason is given for Abram’s selection. Rather, he is given a command--get yourself out of here--and he follows it. This pattern of command and obedience will become the paradigm of action through

which Abram will become Abraham. Similarly, the nation that he founds will define itself through a covenant of command and response. Through this covenant, that nation will fulfill its mission - to be the instrument through which God bestows blessing on the rest of God's creation.

That national mission is confirmed at Sinai when God tells Moses in Exodus 19:6: "If you will attentively hear my voice and guard my covenant, you will be to me a treasure from among all the nations, for all the earth is mine; and you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Exalted as this mission is, it is clearly based on service and conditioned on obedience.

Chapter 26 of the Book of Leviticus makes this conditional quality clear when it devotes eleven verses to enumerate the blessings that will flow to Abraham's descendants for following God's commands, and twenty-five verses to describe the increasingly harsh curses that will come through disobedience. Similarly severe admonitions fill the closing chapters of the Book of Deuteronomy. The message they offer is straightforward: the promise God made to Abraham is eternal but does not of necessity adhere to every one of his descendants. The Jewish people are chosen for responsibility, not privilege.

This is indirectly confirmed in the Talmud where Rabbi Joshua rules that, not just Jews, but the righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come - the Jewish understanding of an afterlife.¹ Righteousness is later defined explicitly as adhering to the seven commandments given to Noah; those being prohibitions against idol worship, desecrating God's name, murder, stealing, sexual impropriety, and eating the limb of a living creature, together with the positive requirement to establish a legal system.

Judaism has long recognized Christianity as an expression of God's will whose teachings promote righteousness. Given this reality, the retention of the idea of chosenness has become increasingly controversial in some streams of Jewish life and thought. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, one of the great theologians of the 20th century and the father of the movement known as Reconstructing Judaism, insisted that chosenness was a necessary concept in the ancient, pagan world. However, in modern times, it has become mere dogma "meant to affirm that the Jewish people has been chosen to occupy forever the central place in the divine scheme of salvation. As such," he went on to declare "it neither is nor can be any longer accepted by modern-minded Jews." Accordingly, the prayer book used in synagogues of the Reconstructing Judaism movement has an alternative Torah blessing which acknowledges God "for drawing us near with Divine service" rather than choosing us from among the nations.

Still, the traditional wording dominates Jewish worship even as the understanding of chosenness is viewed by some with a certain ambivalence. An ancient rabbinic legend has it that, when God offered Israel the Torah, God held Mount Sinai over their heads, promising to drop it on them should they refuse. History has taught the Jewish people that great privilege always entails great responsibility.

¹ Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin, page 105a

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With thanks to...

Dr. Ora Horn Prouser, CEO and Academic Dean
Cantor Michael Kasper, Dean of Cantorial Studies and Director of Student Life
Rabbi Dr. Matthew Goldstone, Assistant Academic Dean
Rabbi Mark S. Diamond, Project Coordinator

AJR Faculty Contributors:

Rabbi Cantor Sam Levine
Rabbi David Evan Markus
Dr. C. Tova Markenson

AJR Alumni Writers:

Rabbi Bruce Alpert
Rabbi Doug Alpert
Rabbi Dr. Jo David
Rabbi Dorit Edut

AJR Student & Alumni Narrators:

Cantor Howard Glantz
Cantor Meredith Greenberg
Rabbi Cantor Sam Levine
Cantorial Student Molly May
Cantorial Student Turia Stark

Guest Script Editor:

Rev. Dr. Daniel Aleshire

Director of Photography, Video & Sound Editor:
Beth Styles | L'Dor Vador Films

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